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In filmmaker George A. Romero's 1978 zombie horror classic, "Dawn of the Dead," the character Peter (Ken Foree) tells Francine (Gaylen Ross) that the creatures they are fighting off are part of Macumba voodoo. He explains that his Trinidadian grandfather used to say, "When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth."

Zombie movies have been around since at least 1932. Zombies seem to have originated in West African and Haitian folklore. To some, zombie films are a subgenre of vampire movies, that are a subgenre of good, old-fashioned horror.

While I am not a particular fan of horror films, the very first one I saw in a movie theater was the 1959 "House on Haunted Hill," starring Vincent Price. I was 7 years old and my little brother was 6. My dad and older brother, who was 8, went to see "The Ten Commandments." My older brother became a hippie and I became a nun. Go figure.

I cannot tell you how many times my readers have told me they think that horror films are immoral. I suppose some of them may have immoral or seemingly inappropriate content, but from those I have seen, they range from supernatural schlock with bad theology ("Constantine," 2005) to socio-psychic brilliance ("Get Out ," 2017) and every place in between.

The best exorcism film was, of course, "The Exorcist" (1973), which Pauline Kael once called "the biggest recruiting poster the Catholic Church has had since the sunnier days of 'Going My Way' and 'The Bells of St. Mary's.' " The devil, or films about exorcism, are practically their own genre. As I discovered when I interviewed director Corin Hardy, he didn't bother with a Catholic theological consultant for his 2018 film "The Nun," and research consisted of watching other movies about exorcisms. They really needed a consultant.

I was present when filmmaker Wes Craven told director Scott Derrickson at the City of Angels Film Fest in 2001 that people go to horror movies because they are already frightened; seeing horror films is a chance to control that fear because there is a beginning a middle and an end to the horror. In a sense, an effective horror film can offer the audience hope for the end to the chaos, or loss of control of one's world.

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I propose that zombie movies are the exact opposite. The only hope for survivors of a zombie infestation is to flee to someplace they think is safe and find out it is not. Well, except maybe for England (see below).

The best source for information on zombie movies are Volumes 1 (2001) and 2 (2011) of *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* by English professor Peter Dendle. He notes that zombies "are one of the few screen creatures in the Hollywood menagerie not of European origin" and "the only creature to pass directly from folklore to the screen, without first having an established literary tradition."

In the introduction to Volume 1, Dendle describes zombies through the various cinematic eras as the fragmentation, the objectification of the human person into parts. As for the source of the walking dead, it could be plague or radiation, such as fallout from the atom bomb at Hiroshima. Our fear, he says, doesn't come from unspecific "pestilence anxiety," but it is "death itself that is the disease."

As for zombies, they are soulless, reanimated corpses of the recently died or unburied that "first appeared as the revived corpse of *vodou* religion, and most of the early zombie films sustain a religious connection," Dendle writes.

Zombies come in hoards and humans don't stand a chance. Once bitten, humans die and then come back. The only way to destroy a zombie is to cut off its head, pierce its brains or burn it.

Until 2004, when Zack Snyder remade "Dawn of the Dead," zombies were slow moving, doing a zombie shuffle. Think of Michael Jackson's 1983 music video for the song "Thriller." They speed up a bit in Snyder's remake and have evolved in more recent zombie films.

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The three films I'm exploring here all have something to say about the human person, society and sometimes religion. There can be more to a zombie movie than dead people. (I have chosen not to include zombies on television as I have not watched any of these series. However, my sister is a fan of "The Walking Dead"

series. She said she likes the show because it is about how people learn to survive in dire times.)

I was invited to be on an Oct. 6 Zoom panel for a rather compelling Cuban-Spanish zombie production, "Juan of the Dead" (2011). The film was part of the Justice and Spirituality on Screen series sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph's Center for Reconciliation and Justice at Loyola Marymount University. The moderator was Michael McNaught, assistant director of the center, and Glenn Gebhard, professor of film and TV production at Loyola Marymount and an Emmy-winning producer of "Cuba: the Forgotten Revolution" (2015), participated.

I had never heard of this film before, but I knew of "Dawn of the Dead," "Shaun of the Dead" and, now, "Juan of the Dead." The titles all rhyme, so I wondered what else they have in common. After I watched and rewatched these, some interesting themes emerged that lifted my idea of zombies on the screen (including television or streaming) to the level of social, political and, to some extent, the religious. They all ask existential questions about the very meaning of human existence.

Snyder's remake of "Dawn of the Dead" (2004), like the original, takes place at a suburban Milwaukee shopping mall where a group of people, including a nurse (Sarah Polley), take refuge from creatures for which they have no name at first. More people join them and then people get bitten and the group realizes the "disease" is communicated through bites.

The mall guards take everyone's guns, but, even then, guns cannot protect the group. Television coverage dies out, people get bitten, reanimate and try to bite others. The survivors decide to use two of the mall shuttles to get to the marina and take a boat to an island where they will be safe. However, zombies find them.

As Officer Ronnie Peterson (Adam Driver) says over and over in Jim Jarmusch's 2019 zombie movie, "The Dead Don't Die" — "Things are not going to end well." Zombies, appearing as soulless consumers of the human body, could be said to represent soulless, mindless consumers milling around American malls. In "Dawn of the Dead," people are consuming themselves to death and the disease is excess.

"Shaun of the Dead" (2004) takes place in London. In fact, as Dendle notes in his encyclopedia, the zombie genre was developed in very creative ways by filmmakers

in countries other than the United States. Directed by Edgar Wright, Shaun (Simon Pegg) works in an electronics store and though he had a girlfriend, Liz (Kate Ashfield), she dumps him as he is more committed to his slacker roommate and gaming buddy, Ed (Nick Frost). They hang out at their local pub, the Winchester.

Shaun is a worker, part of the living dead who have boring jobs. Zombies invade. Shaun and Ed set out to rescue his mother and stepfather, then Liz and her flatmates. They end up going to the pub for safety and find out the Winchester rifle on the wall is fake. Shaun, Ed and Liz have no one to save them from the zombies, so Shaun sets the Winchester on fire as they head to the cellar. The British Army rescues them, but Ed is bitten.

Six months later, the television is back on, life is normal, the zombies have been captured and now work as slaves doing menial, mindless jobs, and Liz and Shaun live together. Ed lives in the shed on a leash, where Shaun goes to play video games with him.

In "Shaun of the Dead," not only are workers zombies, but so are video gamers. What do they live for? It would be a stretch to say love, but there is a little bit of heart in it because of friendship.

This is a very funny movie, if you can stand the gore and the thought of your best friend being a kept zombie to play video games with. While this ending seems more hopeful because people survive, you still wonder if video gaming is enough of a reason to live.

"Juan of the Dead" ("Juan de los Muertos") was a total surprise and I found it exceedingly ghoulish, violent, very crass and really funny. It is pure satire and the writing is excellent. In Spanish, with English subtitles, it is a Cuban-Spanish co-production.

Juan (Alexis Díaz de Villegas) is a 40-year old man who has spent his life doing almost nothing, though he continually says he survived the Revolution and Angola (Cuban troops found in this African country). His sidekick is Lázaro (Jorge Molina, note the name), and they are first attacked by a zombie when they are out fishing on a raft — and contemplating making a run for capitalist Miami, where Juan's ex-wife lives. Juan has a teen daughter who doesn't like him and Lázaro has an

Americanized teen son named Vladi (Andros Perugorría).

When the old woman in their apartment building and her husband die, and people start attacking and eating each other, Juan concludes that the attacking creatures are not the devil or vampires but capitalist dissidents. Juan and Lázaro then go into business — "Juan of the Dead: We kill your beloved ones. How can we help you?"

They are pretty successful in their business, but greed and vengeance against people who owe Lázaro money get in the way. Juan runs the business from the roof of his apartment and takes orders on the phone. At one point, he even talks to Fidel Castro.

It is obvious from the beginning that everyone is tired of the revolution. The two fathers and their kids decide to take a car and fit it with barrels so they can float to Miami, even though the city represents the excessive capitalism they disdain and they have nothing left but their names. Just when they are ready to launch, Juan gets out to continue to fight the zombies — and survive. The others return to fight as well. But will it end well?

"Juan of the Dead" is a huge laugh at the Cuban revolution, where there is little food, money or life's necessities. The old woman in the apartment has a crucifix, and Juan and Lázaro talk about diabolic possession, so religious culture, not to say natural religion shall we say, is part of their lives.

The government continually makes statements about the zombie invasion or plague on television, but it cannot control the zombies, nor save people from them even as it boasts that it can. The anti-capitalist revolution has done nothing to improve the lives of the poor, the walking dead, but they still want to fight because that is what they do. And survive. This is one of the most subversive films I have ever seen.

Scott Young, a film scholar and cultural commentator, summed up the nature and cultural value of zombie films very well in an email he sent me for this article.

"Horror films in general, and zombie movies in particular, are literary and cinematic genres that elicit several cultural meanings," he wrote. "In the movies, most notorious in the 1968 classic 'Night of the Living Dead,' directed by George A. Romero, and in 2002, '28 Days Later,' directed by Danny Boyle, zombies represent

the Other, Outsider, Outcast, the Weird, so evoking a visceral fear. Zombie cinema are often morality plays that signal discriminated groups struggling for equality and individual free spirits scrambling to be untethered by social restrictions. Zombie genre productions have a long history with rich symbolism."

The three films noted here all provide a space to talk about human existence within the contexts of social and political realities, and certainly themes of Catholic social teaching, though I think Snyder's "Dawn of the Dead" is less interesting than the other two. These films are not for the fainthearted. Yet if you approach them from any of these perspectives, you will find something meaningful to talk about.

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